MIAMI TODAY

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The buck stops with voters on charter changes – so let it

Michael Lewis

Miami-Dade commissioners decided 7-6 last week that voters aren't smart enough to choose what's good for us – only commissioners are.

We'll test that notion Aug. 14, when we either vote for three people who think the public is ignorant – thereby proving the point – or pick someone else.

The issue was whether to let us vote on 16 changes to the charter, the county's constitution. Seven commissioners stalled action until Aug. 23, after the election, although they had pledged not to obstruct our votes.

So much for their word.

The 16 proposals come from a charter team that commissioners created.

The charter requires review every five years, which commissioners reluctantly OK'd. They then vowed that unlike many times in the past, when they dumped proposals without giving voters a say, this time they would honor the public, their own charter panel and the charter's intent.

Once again, they didn't.

Five years ago, commissioners gave a charter team 18 months to study, then threw vital proposals into the garbage rather than allow us to vote.

On that panel was wealthy Norman Braman, who took the rejection to heart. He's using money and sweat to oust five commissioners, including three who last week voted to stall a promised public vote on all proposals that got a two-thirds charter team OK.

You can see why Mr. Braman is frustrated. Any serious citizen should be.

Watching the commission is like watching Charlie Brown try to kick a football Lucy is holding for him. Each time, she promises that this time she'll let him kick it – but every time she pulls it back at the last second and he falls on his derriere.

Charlie never learns.

Maybe voters will learn Aug. 14.

The three up for election who sidetracked a decision are former chairman Dennis Moss, Audrey Edmonson and Joe Martinez, now chairman but seeking to be mayor. Mr. Moss faces three other candidates, Ms. Edmonson five and Mr. Martinez six.

Surely, some of those 14 others would let us vote on our constitution. That would put them ahead of the three who stalled a vote.

Perhaps obstructionist commissioners leaned on a Miami Herald editorial calling some task force proposals knuckleheaded – their word, not ours – and urging commissioners to bar a public vote.

The Herald fell into the commission's trap by agreeing voters are too dumb to decide. Besides, the paper said, "the process seems to have been hijacked" by task force members with whom the Herald disagrees – though all were duly chosen.

We believe, along with Commissioner Esteban Bovo, that the commission should keep its word to give voters a shot at any proposal that won a two-thirds task force OK.

"I don't think it serves us well now to start poking holes into all the recommendations," he reasoned correctly. "It just lends itself to the same argument of the past, that the commission either stonewalled it, rejected it or tried to block it."

Come on, Lucy, give Charlie Brown a shot at the ball.

Going back on its word once again is why the commission is so mistrusted. It buttresses Mr. Braman's effort to oust five members.

That's not to say all proposed charter changes are wonderful. If some were on the ballot, we'd recommend a "no" vote.

But the issue is not whether the charter team was more correct, or less, than commissioners, who also have been called knuckleheaded.

The issue is whether the commission can keep its word to give voters their rightful choice.

"At the end of the day, the buck stops with us," said Lynda Bell, who of course has it backwards. At the end of the day, the buck stops with voters who put her and 12 others on the commission and who were promised their rightful vote.

Mr. Martinez pushed commission delay, saying two hours wasn't enough to deliberate. But the charter team studied for months after a commission pledge that this time its two-thirds decisions would go to the ballot.

No commission deliberation of even two minutes was needed to give voters a choice, keeping the pledge. Hours before it let task force chairman Sen. Rene Garcia offer the proposals, the commission had already acted to delay.

That's why the county's governing body is mistrusted. It doesn't listen, reneges and says voters can't properly decide anything important.

On Aug. 14, commissioners Martinez, Edmondson and Moss will learn if they're right about our stupidity. Voters' choices could even cause commissioners the following week to loosen their grip and put task force proposals on the ballot – the one place where the buck truly stops.

Most Americans do better than their parents did

Robert Samuelson

In America, we believe that anyone can grow up to be anything.

You want to be president? Go for it. Among recent presidents, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Lyndon Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower all came from modest backgrounds.

Of course, not everyone will be president, which is why, for most people, one litmus test for how well America works is whether they rise above their parents economically.

Guess what? The long-term trends here are surprisingly good. In the shadow of the Great Recession, that's a refreshing contrast to the prevailing gloom.

A new report from the Pew Mobility Project, a nonpartisan research group, compares the incomes of 40-somethings now with their parents at a similar age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here are its generally upbeat findings:

■Most Americans (84%) exceed their parents' income at a similar stage. Income gains were sizable across the economic spectrum.

For the richest fifth, median income grew 126% from the late 1960s to the early 2000s, from $49,075 to $111,115. Among the poorest fifth, the median rose 74%, from $11,064 to $19,202. (All figures are in inflation-adjusted 2008 dollars.)

■Among sons, 59% had higher inflation-adjusted wages and salaries than their fathers. For the poorest fifth, 85% exceeded their fathers' earnings.

Higher family incomes also reflect more women with paid jobs. (From 1970 to 2000, the labor force participation rate of women 16 and over went from 43% to 60%.) Men's earnings represent 61% of family income, down from 75% in the late 1960s.

■Along with higher incomes, there was much movement across class lines. Fully 60% of children born to the richest fifth of Americans in the late 1960s fell out of that category – 23% to the second richest fifth and the rest scattered; 8% landed in the poorest fifth.

As for upward mobility, about 57% of children born to the poorest fifth of Americans in the late 1960s moved up – 27% into the second poorest fifth and 4% into the richest fifth.

Some findings are less comforting. For example, the wealth (homes, stocks, bonds) of the poorest 60% of Americans has decreased since the late 1960s. For the middle fifth, the decline was 5%; for the poorest fifth, the fall was a staggering 63%.

Debt seems the most likely cause: Americans own more but also owe more. Greater borrowing reduces net worth.

More disturbing, black families remain concentrated at the bottom of the economic ladder despite large income gains: 49% of black families are in the poorest fifth compared with 15% of whites.

But the main message is reassuring: A rising tide really can lift all boats.

Curiously, some commentators are arguing the report shows America has too little mobility. Even Pew says its study reveals "a glass half empty." It cites the facts that 43% of children born of parents in the poorest fifth remain in the poorest fifth and that 40% of children born in the richest fifth stay in the richest fifth. Parents are fate, it seems.

To understand this debate, you need to distinguish between two types of mobility – first, "absolute" mobility, comparing children's incomes with their parents'; and second, "relative" mobility, comparing children's position in the income distribution (often measured from the richest to the poorest fifth of Americans) with their parents'.

As we've seen, most middle-aged Americans have achieved upward mobility by the first definition, at least before the Great Recession. Regarding relative mobility, for everyone who moves up in position, someone else must move down. One hundred percent of the people can't be in the richest 20%.

A rigid class system – with everyone staying in their parents' position – would be undesirable. It would discriminate against effort and talent, stifle ambition and discourage parents from helping their children.

We don't have that. Already, Pew reports, about 70% of children don't end up in their parents' position on the economic ladder: about 35% rise, 35% fall. Would we be better off if 50% rose and 50% fell? Doubtful.

Of course, parents matter. The family is society's crucial institution for shaping character, behavior and economic opportunity. It's better to be born to a richer rather than a poorer family; a two-parent family further improves the odds.

But as anyone with children knows, even parents' influence is limited. And if parents are limited, government interventions to improve children's prospects are more so.

The real questions posed by the Pew study are unanswerable. What will govern the future? Will today's young Americans duplicate their parents' broad gains in living standards – or will their prospects be permanently damaged by the Great Recession?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

County airport perfect for space tourism plans

Regarding your July 12 story on Miami-Dade County's new master plans for airports, it was interesting that it included the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport 30 miles west of Miami in the middle of the Everglades. Once built for Super Sonic Transports in the 1970s – it has one of the longest runways in the US – it became an afterthought once Congress killed the SST.

Here's hoping some forward-looking visionary on staff is thinking about bringing space tourism to South Florida, where such super long runways are needed for safe landings upon return from space. New Mexico has already finished its runway and Space Port and will be the first state in the union to launch civilians into space via Virgin Galactic.

Hopefully Miami will be second.

DC Copeland

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